

EXHIBIT NO.

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Obama Approves Plan to Let Children in Central America Apply for Refugee Status

By Michael D. Shear

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WASHINGTON — President Obama has approved a plan to allow several thousand young children from Central American countries to apply for refugee status in the United States, providing a legal path for some of them to join family members already living in America, White House officials said Tuesday.

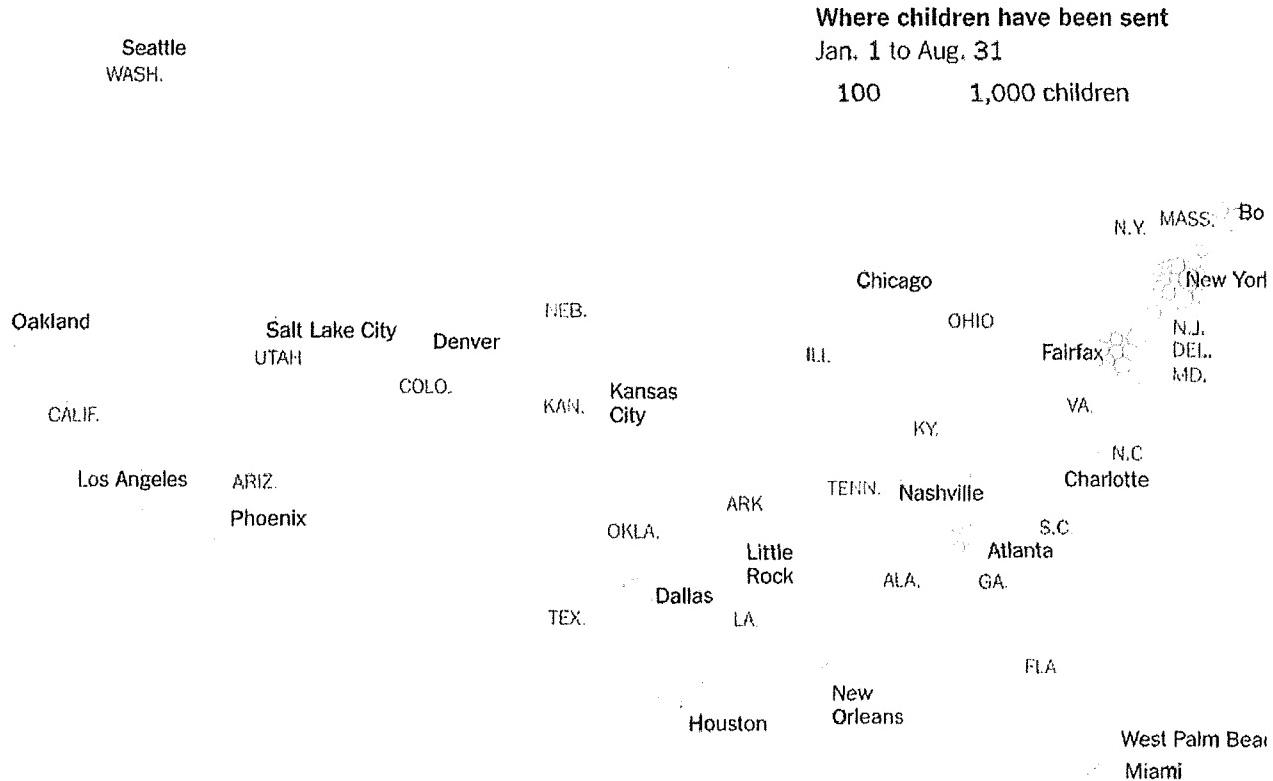
The program is aimed at helping to discourage many children from making a long, dangerous trek across Mexico in an attempt to cross into the United States and join their parents. The idea was first presented to Mr. Obama at the height of the summer's border crisis, when tens of thousands of young children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were pouring across the border from Mexico and presenting themselves to American border patrol agents as refugees fleeing from rape and gang violence.

The spike in migrations raised concerns that the journey across Mexico was often more dangerous than the rough conditions the children were fleeing in their home countries, while the images of border control centers overflowing with unaccompanied children prompted a political backlash against illegal immigration across the country.

Officials have said that the number of children crossing the border has decreased over the last two months, but White House officials said the new program should help to stem that flow even further by providing children a way to determine if they qualify as refugees without leaving their country. In June, more than 10,000 children crossed the border into the United States, according to figures from the Department of Homeland Security, but in August, that number had dropped to slightly more than 3,000 children.

"We are establishing in-country refugee processing to provide a safe, legal and orderly alternative to the dangerous journey that children are currently undertaking to join relatives in the United States," said Shawn Turner, a spokesman for the White House. "These programs will not be a pathway for children to join undocumented relatives in the United States."

Critics have warned that the program could encourage more immigrants to try to enter the United States at a time when the country is struggling to decide how to deal with millions who have already settled here illegally.



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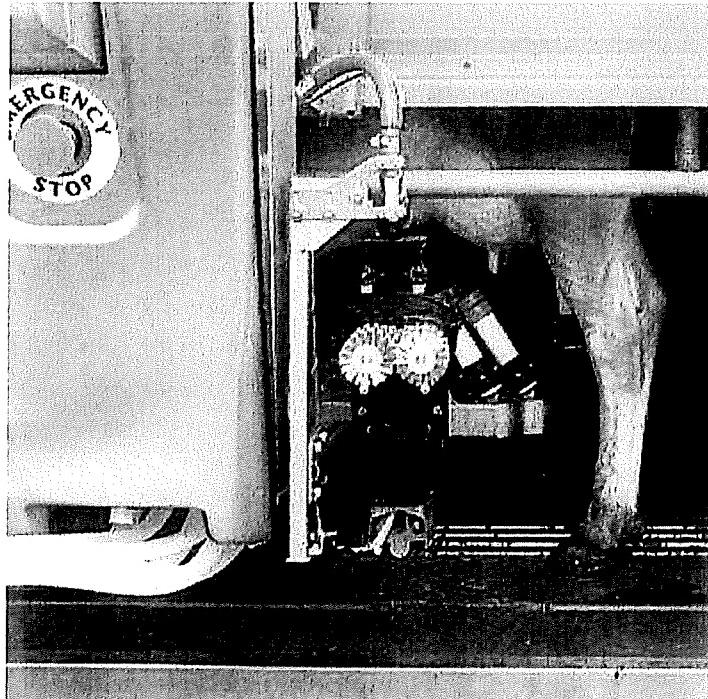
In particular, some critics object to the ease with which the children will be able to visit processing centers in their own countries to determine their eligibility for refugee status. In July, Mark Krikorian, the executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports tighter controls on immigration, predicted that “orders of magnitude more people will apply for refugee status if they can just do it from their home countries.”

Officials countered that the program did not increase the number of refugee visas that the United States would approve. In a memorandum to the State Department released Tuesday, Mr. Obama said that 4,000 of the 70,000 refugee visas should be allocated to people from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Under American law, refugees are people fleeing their country of origin based on fears of persecution by reason of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a

particular social group. The only category that would seem to apply to the children, experts have said, is the “social group” classification — in short, that the children could be considered a vulnerable group endangered by crime and violence in their countries.

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Processing centers in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras will be established, officials said. But they said that “several program parameters” were still being worked out. That could help determine what age the children must be and what dire circumstances they must face to qualify.

The idea of setting up a refugee processing center in other countries is not a novel one, though it has never been done in countries that are reachable by land to the United States. Similar plans were put into effect in Haiti, in the 1990s, and in Vietnam, after the war there prompted many Vietnamese to seek to become refugees in the United States. In both cases, American officials had sought to provide alternatives to dangerous voyages by boat.

Human rights advocates have largely praised the idea, saying the plan would help protect children who are facing rape and even death at the hands of drug trafficking gangs that have become more prevalent in some parts of Central America.

In the memorandum to the State Department, Mr. Obama also said people from Cuba, Eurasia and the Baltics, and Iraq might qualify to become refugees in the United States. But the government will not set up processing in those areas.

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